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ABSTRACT

A writing workshop was developed for undergraduate psychology courses to address problems related to writing skills development. Specific problems addressed by the workshop include the lack of attention paid by students to comments written on their papers during grading, students' tendency to look for easy solutions to their writing weaknesses, and the abundance of papers written the night before the due date. In the workshop, papers are collected at the beginning of class, with authors identified only by pseudonym, and randomly distributed to students. The class selects particular areas in which feedback should be provided, students rate the paper that they have in those areas, and students trade papers among themselves and review a second paper. The students then record papers they reviewed and return the papers to the instructor, who reads the papers, corrects any inaccurate comments, and provides additional comments. Students then review all the comments on their papers and prepare a final draft. Benefits of the workshop include enhanced student learning from seeing other students' writing and being required to rewrite their papers, as well as increased exposure to other students' perceptions of the course material. Concerns included anxieties related to other students' evaluations, increased work for instructors, and lost class time that would otherwise be used to present new material. A workshop outline is appended. (HAA)

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ED 405 035

A Writing Workshop for Sophomores

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The writing workshop which I will be describing was designed to solve a problem that I perceived in my courses. After describing the problem and the context in which it occurred, I will describe my solution (the writing workshop), how I think it works, and some of the concerns it raises.

THE PROBLEM

During the summer of 1991, after my first year of full time teaching, I thought hard about many things that I was dissatisfied with during the foregoing academic year. One of the troublesome issues concerned the development of writing skills in my courses. Some of this may sound familiar to the other professors here.

First, during the fall semester of my first year, I taught a course in personality theory. I asked students in that course to write two papers. The second paper did not seem to be much better than the first. Although I had made extensive comments on the first paper, I had the impression that my comments had disappeared into a black hole, never to be seen again.

This impression was strengthened in the spring semester, when I had many of the same students in an advanced class, and I found that they still had the same kinds of problems in their writing. I had worked hard to provide extensive comments on student papers, but, apparently few students were reading them.

Second, when students did feel the need to talk with me about how to improve their writing, they seemed to be looking for

"cookbook"-style answers. Students did not seem to become engaged in the writing process, but rather wanted to know what the finished product should look like so that they could make a copy of it.

Finally, I got many papers that had been written the night before. They were often illogical, and sometimes incoherent. Students had not bothered to proofread the papers. Students were treating the papers as homework, and I wanted them to think of the papers as products.

THE CONTEXT

To understand how I decided to address these problems, you should know something about the context in which I was (and still am) working. I teach at University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, a regional campus of the University of Pittsburgh. About 2500 students study there, all of whom are undergraduates.

About 120 of these students are psychology majors, and the university employs 6 full-time Ph.D. faculty to teach them psychology. We teach 12 credits (4 courses) per semester. Except for the introduction to psychology course, enrollments are kept under 40 students.

We require 11 specific courses plus 3 electives for the psychology major, for a total of just under 50 credit hours. Most important in this context, students are offered a three-course sequence in personality theory, psychopathology (both of which are required), and psychotherapy (an elective). The

workshop I developed was for the first course in this sequence.

Students typically begin this sequence in first term of the sophomore year. As freshmen, they had introduction to psychology and a some may have had an additional psychology course, such as child development or statistics. They completed a two-semester writing course from the English department, but have probably not written a paper for a psychology course.

In an effort to introduce them to writing about psychology, students in the personality theories course write two or three papers. These papers are not research papers. The first is a reaction paper to the ideas of Freud, who is the focus of several class lectures. The last is a synthesis paper, in which students take parts of the various theories that they think are best and put them together in a manner that "works." (A third paper, when used, is assigned between the other two and has not been submitted to a writing workshop, because of time constraints.) Thus, all students in the course have the background to understand the first and last papers.

THE WORKSHOP

In an effort to address my concerns about student writing, I implemented the writing workshop the second time I taught the personality theories course. It seemed to be successful, and I have continued to use the approach each semester I have taught personality theories.

What happens in the writing workshop? (See Appendix A for

an outline.) We take a day off from normal classroom activities (lecture, discussion, student presentations) and read papers during class time. As noted in the Appendix, students submit their papers with pseudonyms. I collect them at the beginning of class and scramble them up.

Then we discuss the particular areas about which the students want feedback, and make a list on the board. The class usually generates a list of areas to be evaluated that include four or five of the following: grammar, coherence, accuracy, technical style/APA style, strength of arguments, transitions between ideas, quality of the abstract, and meaningfulness. Even though the list is normally the same each semester, I am reluctant to give the list to students; allowing them to generate themselves makes it more meaningful and provides them with a sense of ownership over it.

During the years I have done this, I have learned that students need specific guidance about how to approach the papers. Many have never before evaluated a paper. I encourage them to read the entire paper, marking and commenting as they go, and then to offer a summary comment in each of the areas the class has decided to request feedback. The summary comment is designed to indicate what major change the student author can make to improve the paper in that area.

In addition to the summary comment, students are asked to provide a numerical rating in each area that will direct the

author to the area or areas that are most in need of work. I began to do this because student authors felt overwhelmed by the comments of three and sometimes four reviewers (that is, two to three students, plus myself).

I give each student a paper to review. Students may review papers individually or in pairs. As students complete their reading of the papers, they trade papers among themselves and read a second (and perhaps even a third) paper. Some students who are very concerned about details, and other who get particularly challenging papers, may review only one paper during the class period. Students record which papers they have reviewed, identifying them by the pseudonym. At the end of class, the papers are returned to me, along with a record of the student evaluator's name, pseudonym, and the pseudonyms of the papers they read.

I then read the papers myself, provide my own comments, cross out any inappropriate or inaccurate comments that I notice, and return the papers to the students. The students are encouraged to read their own papers afresh and provide their own evaluation. They are also encouraged to question or challenge any comments on their papers, either by other students or by myself. They then rewrite the papers, and submit the final draft along with the edited draft reviewed in the workshop. Only the final draft is graded.

(In the presentation, papers read and evaluated by students

were handed around for examination at this point.)

BENEFITS

I perceive the benefits of the writing workshop to be several. First, I believe that students learn better writing skills from seeing the writing of others, from applying what they know about writing to student papers, and from being required to rewrite their papers. The final papers I receive from these students are superior to what they were that first year I taught the course. I have been surprised to learn that many students are more self-conscious about their writing when they know their peers will see it. Some students present poor drafts to the workshops, of course, but most do not. Some take much more care with a first draft to their peers than they do when presenting a final draft to me.

Second, students have the opportunity to understand, in more detail than occurs in class discussion, what two or three of their peers think about course material and why. This provides them with a taste of what an academic community can be like - people present ideas, and other people react. An interesting related effect is that students become keenly aware that others do not agree with them - that is, that their way of thinking about something is not the only obvious way of approaching a topic. This galvanizes many students into presenting their ideas more clearly and persuasively.

CONCERNS

What are some of the concerns that are raised? First, the concerns of students: Over the four semesters I have used this approach, I have had two students who are sensitive to others' evaluations who have responded with anxiety. In both cases, the student has submitted the paper on an unusual kind of sheet paper that is recognizable across the room. This allows them to detect who is reading their paper. One of these students was very anxious throughout the workshops, and assumed that laughter on the part of other students was laughter directed at the student author when in fact the student readers were simply joking around.

Last semester, I had two students (working together) who were rude and sarcastic in their reviews, in ways that I feared might be hurtful to the student author. I commented on the paper about the inappropriate nature of their comments before I returned it to the student author, and I also talked individually with the student author. One student reader dropped the class shortly afterward, and I discussed the problem with the other. The student target of all of this is one of my advisees, and as far as I can see, no lasting harm has been done.

Second, what are the concerns on my part? Obviously, doing papers in successive drafts is a lot of work. I have been able to limit my classes to 20 or 25 students in each of two sections, to make the workload manageable. I usually have a total of 40-45

students in this course, across the two sections. I think that having student readers actually reduces the amount of time needed for me to read the papers. Many students compulsively mark errors in grammar and spelling, so that I feel no need to comment on those areas. Some of the better students provide excellent suggestions about improvements, so that I can just write "agreed" and "yes" below their comments and add a few remarks of my own.

CONTENT/PROCESS

Another concern is that I am sacrificing time that might be used to present new material. Indeed, when I discuss the writing workshop with colleagues, many say they could never use it because they would have to give up lecture time. Generally, many of the interesting new pedagogical techniques we hear about have been criticized on that ground: they push aside content. The writing workshop, with its focus on course material with which students are all familiar, avoids this problem nicely. Students do often spend time reacting to the papers on the level of ideas. They talk about whether a particular idea is accurate as presented by the student author. They evaluate the quality of arguments. Occasionally, they even cite evidence to support their concerns about the papers. When they process the papers, and the ideas contained therein, on this deeper level, I think they are easily learning as much as they might in more structured class activities. They are also learning how to converse about ideas, which is itself a valuable part of the college experience.

Appendix A

What Happens in a Writing Workshop?

I. The Day of the Workshop

A. Reference materials are supplied by the professor: the APA Style Manual, writing guides, a dictionary, and a thesaurus.

B. Papers are collected at the beginning of class and are scrambled. Student authors are identified by a pseudonym.

C. Students select areas in which feedback should be provided. Their ideas are recorded on the board; the usual list includes four or five of the following: grammar, coherence, accuracy, technical style, strength of arguments, transitions between ideas, quality of the abstract, and meaningfulness.

D. Students need specific guidance about how to approach the papers. They are encouraged to read the entire paper, marking and commenting as they go. Then they are asked to provide a summary comment in each of the areas that the class decided to ask for feedback ("C", above). The summary comment is designed to indicate what major change the author can make to improve the paper in that area. Students also provide a numerical rating in each area that will direct the student author to the area or areas that are weakest.

D. Students choose to work individually or in pairs.

E. Each student gets a paper to review.

F. Students ask specific questions of the professor or of each other. They consult the reference materials.

G. Students record which papers they review, identifying them by the pseudonym.

H. As students finish reading the papers, they trade papers among themselves and read a second (and perhaps even a third) paper.

I. At the end of class, the papers are returned to the professor, along with a record of the student reviewer's name, pseudonym, and the pseudonyms on the papers they read.

J. Students receive credit for participating appropriately in the workshop.

II. Following the Workshop

During the next several days, the professor reads the papers, providing comments and responding to inappropriate or inaccurate comments. The papers are returned to the students, who are encouraged to read their own papers afresh and provide their own evaluation. They then rewrite the papers.

III. Final Paper Submission

Students submit the final draft along with the edited draft reviewed in the workshop. Only the final draft is graded.